



Dowling, S. F., Mantovani, N., & Hollins, S. (2018). 'I've had a wake-up call and his name is my son': Developing aspiration and making positive choices - Does government policy acknowledge young parents' perspectives? *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(2), 187-206. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674317X15010833122569>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1332/204674317X15010833122569](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674317X15010833122569)

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'I've had a wake-up call and his name is my son'

**Developing aspiration and making positive choices – does government policy
acknowledge young parents' perspectives?**

Introduction

Teenage pregnancy is often associated with a number of negative stereotypes which emphasise teenage mothers' risks and deficits (SmithBattle, 2013), with UK policy typically presenting teenage pregnancy as an entrenched social problem with consequent negative outcomes for young parents and their child(ren) (Bonnell, 2004). The broad policy focus in the UK, both of the past Labour and Coalition governments, and the current Conservative government, has been on the prevention of teenage pregnancy. A range of programmes mainly within education or through voluntary sector organisations have been devised and delivered, with the predominant aim of informing and educating young people about the risks of unprotected sex and promiscuity, not least unintended pregnancy, and the difficulties associated with teenage parenthood. Both Lindberg (2012) and Wellings (2013) report on the protective effect of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE), However, there is inconsistency in the provision of SRE in schools in England with Ofsted (2013) reporting that this teaching requires improvement in over a third of primary and half of secondary schools nationally. Teachers have advocated for training in SRE with more than two thirds of teachers reporting a need for more training to deliver the subject confidently (Sex Education Forum, 2014).

Through the media teenage parents are often presented as a proxy for intergenerational poverty and the dissolution of the family; a product of the ills of society (Griffin, 1993; Kelly, 2000). This stigmatisation of young mothers and fathers can lead to name-calling, negative stereotyping and social exclusion (Yardley, 2008). Research suggest a very different picture, wherein youthful parenthood can be a transformative experience for young people (Mantovani and Thomas, 2014). This study adds to existing literature by considering, from the perspectives of young people

themselves, how their aspirations, attitudes and subsequent attainments are shaped by the experience of young pregnancy and parenthood. That indeed young parenthood inspires the development of new aspirations. This paper building on existing research explores how the experience of young parenthood could be viewed as a conduit for raising educational attainment, outcomes and trajectories, rather than being viewed as having a wholly negative impact. Researchers report concern about the limited attention which evidence reporting on the potentially positive impacts of young parenthood appears to have had in informing policy development or action plans (Duncan et al., 2010).

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study carried out with teenage mothers and fathers in one South London borough as well as with key professional informants. The study considered the impact of becoming parents in relation to young people's choices, aspirations and future opportunities. The paper will draw on findings from the study to show the impact of parenthood on these young people's future hopes and aspirations. It will provide context through a broad consideration of relatively recent UK governments' policies regarding teenage pregnancy and parenthood and will then report on academic literature focused on the same issue. In discussion of findings the paper will consider the paradox of how teenage pregnancy is viewed in the policy context and how it is experienced by participants in this study. It will consider whether strategies, which operate at a population level with a focus on prevention are fully attentive to the underlying social issues which are linked to teenage pregnancy. It will pose the question of how higher aspirations could be developed in disadvantaged young people so as to widen their life choices and offer routes to the development of aspiration.

Terminology and definition

The term teenager is not uniformly applied within a policy, programme or research context. It is variously used to delineate those under 18, 19 or 20 years of age in different contexts. The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (1999) and The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy: Beyond 2010 (2010) both refer primarily to those under 18 years.

The wide-ranging national policy initiative Every Child Matters (2007) focused on children and young people up to 19 years. The Infant Feeding Survey (2010) employs data from the under 20-age group. Research studies use various age cut-offs from under 18's to under 20's. Local authority services' age banding tends to reflect local needs and resources (DCSF and DH, 2008).

Latest figures produced by the Office of National Statistics show that under 18 conception rates are currently at their lowest in the UK since 1969 with 22.9 conceptions per thousand to women aged between 15 and 17. The estimated number of conceptions to women aged under 18 fell to 22,653 in 2014, compared with 24,306 in 2013, a decrease of 6.8%. The estimated number of conceptions to women aged under 16 was 4,160 in 2014, compared with 4,648 in 2013, a fall of 10% (Office of National Statistics, 2016) with evidence of "the trend towards older motherhood continuing" (Anne Furedi, BBC, 2014). Conceptions leading to births are reported to be higher in local authority areas that are more economically deprived, whilst there is a higher rate of conceptions which end in abortion in more affluent districts (Berthoud et al., 2004), where conceptions also tend to be lower in frequency (Uren et al., 2007).

UK policy and messages from research

The 1999 Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPU), launched as an output of the Labour government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), was to set the scene for UK policy regarding teenage pregnancy for the decade that followed and beyond. Teenage pregnancy was constructed within the Strategy as an entrenched social problem that was strongly linked to social disadvantage. Rather than being seen as a product of such disadvantage, teenage parenthood was drawn as the path to its perpetuation. Teenage pregnancy and parenthood were portrayed as the arbiter of damaging outcomes for both mothers and babies. The central thrust of the strategy was twofold: to halve the numbers of teenage (under 18) conceptions by 2010 and to encourage the engagement of young mothers in education or employment in order to address ongoing marginalization and exclusion (SEU, 1999).

The 1999 Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was perceived to be a “legitimate response to the ever-rising rates of teenage pregnancy and fertility”, (Arai, 2009: 171). However, statistics at the time of publication of the TPU suggest that rates of teenage pregnancy in the UK were already experiencing a downward trend (Singh and Darroch, 2000) and have continued, as attested by the figures highlighted above. Whilst the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy advocated prevention, initiatives were also aimed at encouraging the support of mothers and babies through Sure Start, Sure Start Plus and the Children’s Fund, with a view to redressing deprivation and providing additional support to families. These measures were welcomed amongst practitioners engaged with young people (Weyman, 2003), as were measures to promote inclusion through educational opportunities for young mothers.

In 2003 the Health Development Agency published a review of teenage pregnancy and parenthood. In this they report that teenage pregnancy and early parenthood can be associated with poor educational achievement, poor physical and mental health, social isolation, poverty and related factors (Swann et al., 2003). That teenage parenthood is a one-way path to poor parental and child outcomes has become accepted rhetoric both in the UK and internationally (Daguerre and Nativel, 2006; UNICEF, 2003).

Within the revised Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (2010) there was an identified strand of work underlining the promotion of aspiration and positive outcomes in young people who had already become parents. This encouraged the early identification of young parents with a view to signposting them towards tailored maternity care as well as the offer of dedicated professional advice on health, education, benefits, child care and family support. Whilst this was present it was not at the forefront of the Strategy.

The Coalition Government (2010-2015) realigned the goal of reducing teenage pregnancy within the wider remit of challenging health inequalities. In 2012 the Department of Education was charged with the responsibility for integrating learning about pregnancy into personal, social, health and economic lessons (PSHE). Further

initiatives included increasing the availability of contraception and sexual health services to young people as well as targeting Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) at young people deemed to be at higher risk of pregnancy. A statutory duty for the health and well-being of local populations with an emphasis on a reduction in health inequalities was given to the Local Authority Health and Wellbeing Boards in England in April 2013 (Health and Social Care Act, 2012). This was to be addressed through joint strategic needs assessments; for young people there was also to be a focus on supporting healthy lifestyle choices and avoiding risky sexual behaviours (Department for Education, 2011). Achieving a reduction in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections was a central tenet of local authority strategies to redress child poverty and reduce health inequalities (Department for Education, 2011). Research evidence, which delineates the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on rates of teenage pregnancy, informed these policy developments and strategic plans.

Teenage pregnancy rates in England and Wales, under the present Conservative government, are at their lowest level in 70 years though they remain high by comparison with other European countries (ONS, 2014). The present government continues to regard teenage pregnancy as a public health priority and to make the link between teen parenthood and social deprivation. For instance, the Public Health Outcomes Framework (2016) includes as a public health indicator the ongoing reduction in the rate of under 18 conceptions as a high priority, in measuring *Health Improvement* under the objective: People are helped to live healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices and reduce health inequalities. This resonates with the reported link between teenage pregnancy and parenthood and poor educational outcomes as well as associating teenage parenthood with an increased likelihood of living in poverty in adult life (DH, 2010). However, financial cuts introduced through the austerity agendas of the present Conservative and past Coalition governments have seen the closure of many of the initiatives introduced in the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy aimed at countering social deprivation.

A number of commentators have challenged the negative associations between teenage pregnancy, poor outcomes and social exclusion (Arai, 2009; Duncan et al., 2010). Duncan et al. (2010) question the validity of statistical evidence, which they contend often fails to compare like for like. For instance, if *teenage* mothers are compared with *all* mothers, rather than with their peers who are not parents, differences in outcomes are likely to be due to social and environmental factors (as teenage parenthood is concentrated in areas of social and economic deprivation) rather than age alone. Duncan et al. (2010) advocate for like for like comparisons and propose that poor outcomes amongst young mothers may be linked to the impact of pre-pregnancy disadvantage rather than attributable to early parenthood. They go on to suggest that social disadvantage may be a cause of early parenthood rather than an outcome of it (also Duncan, 2007). Hoffman (1998) reported that the impact of mother's age at birth had very little impact on child outcomes; indeed contrary to popular perceptions, Geronimus (1997) reported that by their mid/late twenties, teenage mothers had better outcomes in terms of education and income than their peers who had miscarried a pregnancy in their teenage years. These findings resonate with UK studies (Ermisch and Pevalin, 2003) which reported little effect of teenage motherhood on educational level or income by the age of thirty.

Besides challenges to the statistical rationale used to underpin policy, which is premised on an assumption of negative outcomes from teenage pregnancy and popular perspectives on teenage pregnancy, there has been an emerging body of qualitative research that has gathered young mothers' own perspectives on parenthood. They point to more positive outcomes for teenage mothers (Phoenix, 1991; Jones, 2002, Clemmens, 2003; McDermott et al., 2004; Arai, 2009, Formby et al., 2010) reporting on a growth in self-esteem, confidence and ambition amongst young mothers. For some young parents it seems that their babies are a conduit for the development of educational and career aspirations as well as positive choices for future well-being.

Duncan et al. (2010) draw attention to the significant gap between the strategic direction of policy, which is focused on prevention, and the research evidence, which serves to deconstruct the notion of teenage pregnancy as an unremitting social ill. There is a correlation between youthful parenthood and indicators of negative outcomes in relation to health, finances, education and life chances (Berthoud 2004; Hosie, 2007), but as Arai (2009: 172) notes “correlation is not the same as causation” (also Duncan, 2007) and poor outcomes may not be solely dependent on the age at conception. Arai notes that “within the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy there is an acknowledgement that factors such as relative deprivation and poor access to services play a role in the creation of social exclusion, but there is still a strong tendency to see age itself as a significant, independent, explanatory factor.” (2009: 172). The link between age at conception and poor longer term outcomes for mother and child continues to be made, with the UK Minister for Children in 2011 stating, in the context of a drop in teenage parenthood, “there is still much to do to further reduce the numbers of teenagers whose lives are changed forever by an often unwanted pregnancy. Teenage parents and their children are more likely to suffer from poor health, unemployment and poor achievement at school than their peers.” (February 2011, quoted in Dickens et al., 2012). Thus positioning early motherhood again as the cause of poor outcomes rather than a result of social deprivation and poverty.

The popular press in the UK tends to portray young parents as a social evil, often adopting a bullying tone as exemplified in a recent Daily Mail article entitled “UK tops league of teenage pregnancy” which suggested a “huge growth in single parenthood in the UK in recent years, much of it a result of teenage pregnancy”, (this contradicts recent statistics showing a decline in teenage pregnancy, quoted above); the article went on to perpetuate negative stereotyping associating teenage parenthood with “sink estates” and the route to a “free flat.” (Steve Doughty, Daily Mail, May 16, 2014). There is still a notion that teenage pregnancy is being ‘used’ as a means to access housing, to live off the state, fail to contribute and indeed to challenge the very notion of the family. These perspectives have become culturally embedded in what Gramsci referred to as a ‘common sense’ response (Patnaik, 1988), in this case to teenage

parenthood. Cultural articulation at this common sense level is stubborn and resistant to change, it is 'the way things are', it is seen as a given. That such attitudes are damaging to individual young people's lives and place in society is a secondary concern in these narratives.

Aims of the study

The aims of the study were to explore the perspectives of a group of young parents on their early parenthood and to consider whether being parents had brought a change in their outlook and aspirations. The objective was to understand whether aspiration impacted on choices in relation to young parenthood or whether young parenthood impacted on life aspiration, both in the context of prevailing social policy and current 'common sense' attitudes to young parents, as discussed above.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, undertaken by two female researchers during the summer of 2012. Interviews were conducted with young people (n=15) as well as with a range of key informants (n=10). The key informants were all professionals engaged with work relating to teenage pregnancy. Interviewing key informants as well as young parents enabled the study to consider whether there were similarities or differences in the perceptions of professionals about the young people's aspirations compared with those of the young people themselves. With both groups interviews lasted for approximately one hour, were undertaken in young people's own homes and at an agreed location with professionals. Young people were given a £20 voucher to thank them for their time and contribution to the work. Interviews undertaken with all participants were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of data. Analysis of data presented in this paper was undertaken using the framework approach (Richie, 2003). Using this method, data was managed using a matrix housing a case and theme based approach. This method enabled both organization and reduction of the data and for themes to retain a link to the original data. The method also allowed for both description and explanation to be drawn from emergent themes.

The sample

Professionals interviewed represented the fields of medicine, education, research, policy and practice as well as voluntary sector support organisations. Each of the professionals were invited to take part by the research team following their recommendation by the project Steering Committee on the basis of their expert knowledge of the field and long-standing interest in the issues of central concern to this study.

A purposive sample frame was devised. This included young people who were both male and female, aged between 16–19 years, were already parents or currently expecting the birth of their baby. Young people meeting these criteria were recruited in one South London borough, which reports a relatively high rate of teenage pregnancy/parenthood. Participants were recruited through young mothers' and young fathers' groups in the local area as well as through links with a local family planning centre.

In total fifteen young people took part in the study, five of whom were male and ten female. Table 1 shows the demographic make-up of young people as well as their educational, employment and parenting status.

(insert table 1 here)

Half of the young women were in the youngest age group (16) and half were in a relationship with their child's father. The majority of young women had achieved at least 2 GCSE's although at the time of the study most were unemployed (with very small babies), one was in part time employment and three were still in education. The young men tended towards the upper end of the age range, and all were either in a relationship with their child's mother or maintained contact with their baby. The majority of young men (3) had no educational qualifications and of the five male participants, four were unemployed at the time of the study.

Recruitment

Young people were first contacted about the study by their key worker in the young mothers'/fathers' support group, where they were given information about the study and asked whether they would consent to their contact details being passed onto researchers. The researcher then made contact with each young person to give them more detail about the project and describe what participation would entail. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the research and informed of steps that would be taken to ensure the fidelity of this, such as giving young people a pseudonym and altering any identifying details in reporting. It was also explained to young people that their participation was entirely voluntary, that it would in no way affect any services or benefits they were in receipt of and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Service (NRES) (N.11/EE/0477).

Interviews

Young people and professional informants were interviewed at a time and location which was convenient for them. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Young people were asked a series of questions aimed at exploring what affected their educational attainments and goal settings. Therefore, questions were asked about: their goals (the things they were interested in accomplishing and the things they did in order to achieve them); their education (their experiences of school and how school experiences helped them to plan their goals); their relationships and the support received from this person(s) to achieve their goals); the influences they experienced regarding their parental and educational choices and goal settings; and their identity (desire to become parents at the time it did).

Interviews with professional informants investigated their views on the delivery and usefulness of SRE and teenage pregnancy prevention programmes, outcomes for young parents, support available for teenage parents and what works in providing support to young parents. Professionals also commented on the policy context.

Findings

Three themes are drawn from the perspectives of young people and professionals, examining questions of aspirations and choice amongst young parents. Additional findings arising from the data are published elsewhere (Mantovani, Dowling and Hollins, 2016). The themes reported here are drawn from interviews with both young parents and key informants and relate firstly to young people's school experience and aspirations derived from the school environment, secondly to the relationship between parenthood and the impact of this on future aspirations, and finally to the disconnection between how young people view themselves as parents and how they perceive themselves to be viewed by wider society.

Education and aspiration

Many of the young people in the study reported negative educational experiences, which they attributed to their school environment and saw as contributing to their low aspirations. The physical environment was described by one participant as almost metaphorically capturing the mood of school for her:

It wasn't a very good school. [...] It just wasn't a nice place to be. It was dull and they didn't really make anything interesting, to be honest. [...] It should have been a happier environment. I keep mentioning it was dull, it was dull because the walls were grey. Who wants to go to a school with grey walls? Even though it might be silly to say about the walls, but it is the tiniest detail (Young mother, 16).

The reported negative school experience was also attributed to the influence of others, as well as their susceptibility to negative influences, as one young person stated:

In my first year of school I was good. I was doing my work and then after a while, when I mixed in with the wrong crowd, obviously influenced me and I kind of messed up (Young father, 18).

Another said:

It was sort of the thing where: 'Do you want to go to your lesson? No, I don't really want to go either'. So, we'd just go off together. [...] I wouldn't say there was one....I'd say we all influenced each other to leave school (Young mother, 16).

Young people recognized negative peer influences on their behaviour, although only retrospectively and from the perspective they had gained as parents.

Young people also talked about problems at school with bullying and aggression which were described by a number of the young people:

It was an all-girls school and it was so bitchy [...] and there were loads of fights going on; I really hated it (Young mother, 17).

Others talked about being involved in rebellious and difficult behaviour at school. This clearly would have had an impact on their educational outcomes:

[I was]...just bad and doing bad things at school, like fighting with the kids (Young mother 19).

Some young people stated that they 'used to get into quite a lot of fights and arguing,' and that were 'always being excluded and bunking off' (Young mother, 17). In some cases school was described as a fairly chaotic environment, 'it was crazy', and in one case a young father 'got stabbed while in school' (Young father, 17).

There was little or no talk of aspiration when young people reflected on this aspect of their schooling. They did not refer to ambition or to hopes or plans for the future, only to the challenges and difficulties they experienced in relation to hanging out with people who influenced them negatively, or being involved in truancy or disruptive behaviour.

Some young people did talk about the efforts of teachers to offer a positive educational experience as 'they did [try to help] for a little while'. This was perceived as short-lived. Teachers, 'after a while just gave up, they just didn't bother anymore' (Young mother 18). Many of the young people reflected on how their interactions with

teachers and their own attitudes towards school and their education had shaped the outcome:

Basically they tried teaching me like I was some sort of idiot. I wasn't an idiot I was a very bright person but because I had a temper on me they tried urging me to go to the max so they could kick me out of school. So, what they tried doing was making me lose my temper, instead of helping me through it – they wouldn't help me through it. So, I was like: 'Fair enough, you want it, you've got it'. It's as simple as that, I lost my temper and I'd get kicked out. I just gave up after a couple of years (Young father, 19).

Another participant said:

I just messed up and lost all interest and didn't care about education any longer (Young mother, 18).

The lack of attention or care in relation to their education was common amongst the young people interviewed. Young people did not report any level of aspiration or personal ambition at this point in their lives. Similarly, some reported that they were not encouraged by care givers and that the feedback from school was also very negative. No one; the parents or the school, not even young people themselves are reported to be ambitious for these young people and there is no reference in the data to important relationships or role models in their lives at this stage.

Some of the young people linked the difficulties they had in achieving in their lessons at school with things that were happening in their home:

It was always like family problems. I never used to concentrate when I was doing stuff, I used to think of my family and the problems I used to have in the house, and go home (Florence, 18).

One young father spoke of a lack of encouragement both at school and at home:

They [teachers] all said the same thing as my parents did – that I won't make it anywhere (Young Father, 19).

The data presented here draws a relatively negative picture of the educational experiences of young parents who took part in the study. Unstimulating environments, lack of engagement with school, challenging peer influences, disruptive behaviour, poor relationships with teachers and the impact of unsettled home environments were all cited as factors that negatively affected young people's experience of school. Few of these young people described school as a place where they developed ideas or aspirations for the future, rather, for most it was somewhere they wished to move on from, to leave behind.

Findings drawn from interviews with professionals demonstrated how the educational environment emerged as a critical site wherein aspiration could be shaped and nurtured. This is said to have an 'impact on aspirations [in] the extent to which a child feels engaged by education and excited in pursuing education' (Professional-04). Indeed one informant pointed to research that has shown that engagement with and achievement in education can override the disadvantages generated by poverty.

A great deal has to do with education and how inspirational and aspirational education is in terms of lifting kids' heads above the situations they are in (Professional-07).

However, engagement with education, and the outcome of education is again linked, by informants, to teacher expectations, as one said:

Sometimes the kids who are going to do well anyway are the ones that we have higher expectations of. And the ones that people don't think are going to do well, who are exactly the ones who need the high expectations, are the ones who don't get that attention (Professional-09).

In part, engagement in education and achievement are reported as a means of developing self-esteem and confidence and as a vehicle through which young people could envisage success in achieving later life goals. Additionally, informants

highlighted the role of relationships with teachers in helping young people find a sense of purpose and meaning:

Young women who feel supported by their schools and confident about their future are less likely to view parenthood as a way of finding meaning and gaining respect from their peers and communities (Professional-02).

Whereas, it was also reported:

Girls who opt out of education early are more likely to become young mothers (Professional-02).

Impact of parenthood on young people's outlook, motivation and aspiration

Young people draw a consistent picture of their own life aspirations, future prospects and general outlook since becoming parents which contrasts with mainstream perspectives, described earlier. The experience of parenthood appears to have a dramatic and transformative impact on both young mothers and fathers. Where there was previously a destructive outlook and challenging behaviour:

I was going out doing bad things, like, smoking and drinking [...] all my friends were like that [...] just bad, doing bad things at school, like fighting. Fighting with the kids things like that (Young mother, 16).

Young fathers too talked of their lives before their child was born in fairly negative terms; getting into trouble with the police:

Basically all my life I have been doing silly little things. [...] I used to always get nicked (arrested) and stuff like that (Young father, 18).

Or just being directionless and without motivation:

Before I found out my girlfriend was pregnant I was actually a bum. I didn't do nothing. I just sat around all day and I signed on every two weeks and got £100 (Young father, 19).

However, since becoming parents, young people report a rapid and striking change in their outlook and associated behaviour, one young mother stated:

I am more responsible since I had her (daughter), she has made me grow up a lot (Young mother, 17).

Her comments mirrored in that of another young mother:

I don't just want to live on benefits, I want to work. I want her to see me as a good example for her (Young mother, 18).

Fathers too reported a transformation in their approach to life and outlook since their child had arrived:

As soon as I found out my girlfriend was pregnant I got a job straight away. To be honest, that wasn't always my dream job, but at the moment it is the only place I can see myself going (Young father, 19).

Another said:

I've had a wake-up call and his name is my son. He's given me a wake-up call to do something with my life (Young father, 18).

For young fathers there is a sense in which they have shed the subversive, unproductive lifestyles characterised in the quotes above and adopted a more traditional and even conservative approach to parenthood, and specifically fatherhood:

Basically [a man's role] is always to be there for his Mrs. To bring the money in. Pay for the child. Just do the random father things. You know, because, like before the child I could mess about, now I can't. My main goal right now is just to support my family. That is it (Young father, 19).

Another, in describing his perceived role as 'breadwinner' and 'protector' of his girlfriend and young child, said: 'You're the man innit, that what you're supposed to do' (Young father, 18). The huge step from disengaged young person to traditional, responsible father is attributed entirely to the onset of parenthood: 'She [daughter]

has made me to fix up' (Young father, 19). The data also presents a strong sense of young people being inspired and empowered as parents. Many talked about their strong motivation since becoming parents: to achieve their goals and to make a better life for themselves and their child. One young mother stated:

She is my main, how would you explain it... my main inspiration of getting to these achievements that I want to get to. And I want to do it for myself as well so that I can have everything to give her. I think my daughter helps me a lot. Just because I'm doing it all for her now, it's not just me anymore. So, obviously she's a big push because I want her to have everything (Young mother, 16).

Young people identified themselves as becoming more ambitious and determined.

Oh it's (the pregnancy) pushed me. It's pushed me to achieve my goals even more now. I was just doing it for myself, so I thought [...] but now I have a little baby to look after it's pushed me to get further and to achieve my goals for her more than for myself now. It's pushed me to achieve what I want to do (Young mother, 19).

The transformation described in the data is remarkable. It seems that parenthood has, at least in these early stages of young people's lives imbued in them a sense of purpose, value and meaning, which was previously absent. They present an outlook in terms of motivation, aspiration and ambition, which these young people had not previously found in their relationships, their social environment, their home environment or in their educational settings. Yet, when presented with a pathway to aspiration, these young people present themselves as ready for the challenge, welcoming of maturity and new relationships, and willing to take positive steps to make a better life for themselves and their child.

Key informants interviewed often made a close correlation between aspiration and the choices that young people make, linking choices relating to risk-taking behaviour

such as engagement with drugs, alcohol and sexual activity. One informant made a direct link between aspirations and parenthood:

I honestly believe that aspiration is the framework in which decisions about pregnancy are made (Professional-07).

But crucially, understanding the meaning of aspiration is a key aspect of understanding how decisions are formed, as one key informant stated:

....aspiration is about what you hope not what a set of policies hopes for you (Professional-05).

It is important in the context of this paper to understand aspiration in the realm of hope for the future, of setting a path on which to travel and a means of acquiring the tools to get there. Aspiration of this kind is not always evident in public policy where the agenda or starting point may be largely different to that which is pertinent in young people's lived experiences. Social attitudes, often reflective of media portrayals of young parents highlighted above, were also found in the data to challenge the aspirational ideals expressed by young parents.

Social attitudes and identity

In contrast to the positive impact young people report in relation to their outlook and sense of aspiration and possibility following the birth of their child, and how they perceive themselves as young parents, the way they are viewed by wider society has more negative overtones. Often, teenage mothers are held to be morally responsible: they are to be 'blamed' for an unplanned pregnancy – the result of under-age unsafe sexual practices (Mantovani and Thomas, 2014). Young people feel themselves to be stigmatised and judged negatively because they are parents. One young mother expressed how this affected their behaviour and sense of self:

There's a massive stigma about being a young mum. We get lots of bad press. I am constantly worrying about what I'm wearing and how I'm acting, because I don't want people to think: "Oh look at her" sort of thing. It is a lot of pressure. I was walking down the

road with a group of young mums, [...] and there were these people laughing at us. Obviously, I think it was because we were young, so it's not very nice. And we get people often call us slags and things like that because...there we are (Young mother, 16).

The negative views, often expressed to young mothers through derisory comments, 'they call you a slut or a 'ho' basically,' resonate with the media portrayal of young parenthood discussed above. The experiences which young people reported emphasised their acute awareness of how they are perceived in wider society. These negative attitudes are divorced from the views that young people have of themselves as parents, however, they create a barrier to acceptance and social inclusion and only serve to diminish the attempts that young people are reportedly making to create a better life for themselves.

Key informants also identified similar challenges confronting young people including being stigmatised and the pressure of negative stereotypes. Some reported that young people feel that they are not liked by adults that there is a chasm of understanding, that the dominant media stereotypes of young parents as irresponsible, poor role models and dependent on the state is detrimental to their well-being and often unfair. One informant suggested a more positive approach which might better support aspiration and diminish unnecessary and damaging stereotyping:

Love and respect young people, in order to see their potential. To see what is best in them. Expect the best from them and they give it to you. What hinders aspiration is to see the worst, expect the worst, label a young person and that is what you'll get back. As you perceive someone they will tend to behave that way (Professional-02).

This largely captures what many of the young people themselves stated, and in this the young people are showing leadership. Given the opportunity to aspire, young

people interviewed in this study grasped it, willingly. They also reported the gulf between how they are approaching their future and how they are perceived in the public mind – their positive outlook, their aspirational intent is not reflected back to them in how they think others perceive them. This point and others raised by the findings of this study will be discussed in more detail below.

Discussion

Policy responds to epidemiological evidence and the out-workings of this often produces a focus on behaviour change (Dickens et al., 2012). Having identified a correlation between teenage pregnancy, poverty and social deprivation, the central thrust of the social policy response has been to try to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancy. However, as noted above, correlation is not the same as causation. Policies forge a narrative that problematise the pregnant teen, positioning them as a vehicle of poverty and dependence as well as the arbiter of poor educational and health outcomes for both them and their children. Provision of education and awareness raising programmes, aimed at changing behaviour need to be aligned with the underlying social challenges, as it is suggested that a deprived social and educational experience make becoming a young parent an almost ‘common sense’ choice (Geronimus, 1996).

Previous research indicates that a teen’s decision to end a pregnancy seems to be driven in large measure by their future aspirations and their hopes of achieving them (Sedgh et al., 2015). By contrast, our study indicates that on becoming parents young people, male and female, became more determined to do well for their children, more forward looking and became defined by a newly acquired aspirational outlook. In their own words they describe their lack of engagement with education, their ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’, ‘getting involved with drugs’, ‘fighting’ and so on. Aspiration did not feature in their descriptions of themselves before they became parents. They had not been inspired to aspire either through their educational or social experiences. However, parenthood for these young people could be described as a conduit to aspiration. Their accounts are striking in the internal contrasts of their narratives, they

are transformative. The changed perspectives consequent to becoming parents were grasped and embraced by these young people. Their self-descriptions are those that policy makers and social commentators would hope for. Given the opportunity, young people in this study have shown themselves to be active and willing in engaging with positive choices and aspirational attitudes.

Camerana et al., (1998) suggest that adolescent mothers manage their own aspirations as well as holding high aspirations for their children. It is suggested that their experiences of disadvantage ignite a drive amongst young parents for their children to more opportunities in life, to be socially mobile and have choices available to them (Hallam & Creech 2007). The data presented in this study reflects this position in that young parents talked about their children having opportunities that they did not, and that they as parents aimed to be a role model for their children. From a policy perspective, we can again draw on Hallam & Creech who recommend that *“teenage mothers need to be supported in sustaining their personal and parental aspirations. Long-terms programmes which work to mothers’ strengths and that recognize cultural differences and offer attentive listening and coaching are needed”* (p.19). The kind of support that the young people in the study did not encounter in their experiences of school.

However, whilst early parenthood was represented by young people in this study as a conduit to their growing aspiration, this paper is not arguing that early parenthood should be regarded as an ideal route for finding meaning and making positive choices (Mantovani and Thomas, 2014). The intense and ever changing caring responsibilities, which accompany parenthood, inevitably place additional challenges and pressures on young parents as they grow towards adulthood. Commentators argue that social policy fails to address the underlying problems which contribute to intended or unintended teenage pregnancy (Dickens et al., 2012), and it is clear that the education system and social environment, for some, fail to ignite aspiration, meaning or future hope for some young people.

How can this paradox be unravelled? A policy focus on prevention does not at the same time offer a pathway to aspiration. As stated above, it is about behaviour change focused on a particular outcome, it is linear and targeted. However, to address the wider social issues additional targeted strategies are needed so as to enable young people to realise their hopes and not cap their aspiration as a response to challenging social circumstances. One example of a strategy which appears to be addressing these complex personal and social issues is delivered by the charity Teens and Toddlers (Jessiman et al., 2012). This national charity aims to encourage in young people the fulfilment of their potential by imbuing a sense of personal value and ambition. The charity works with young people from socially deprived neighbourhoods, who may have been excluded from school and are moving towards the margins of society. Young people attend a ten-week programme designed to prevent both being 'Not in Education Employment or Training' (NEET), and to avoid teenage pregnancy. The outcomes are impressive with 95% of young people who have been through the programme remaining in employment, education or training between the ages of 16-18, and 96% not reporting a conception prior to the age of 18. In addition, participants report a growth in self-esteem, confidence, ambition and belief that they can achieve their goals. This programme is based on the premise that prevention of teenage pregnancy is not enough, it needs to be accompanied by strategies which address the negative consequences of living in socially deprived neighbourhoods and in the absence of supportive relationships (Jessiman et al., 2012). However, it is important to note that all of the young people who participated in this study were engaged with parenting services which aimed to develop their parenting skills and offer support. Whilst, this study did not seek to analyse the impact of engagement in these services amongst young people, these services could be viewed as a space in which aspiration and positive outcomes are fostered.

Teenage pregnancy may be occurring at a reduced rate in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2014), however, it is unlikely to disappear altogether. The findings of this study indicate that in contrast to public perceptions and policy responses, parenthood can be a positive experience for young people. With adequate support young mothers

and fathers may in fact experience parenthood as a pivotal moment of transformation in their lives. Kidger (2004) highlights the role of parenthood as a pathway to social inclusion for these young people, who may have experienced structural and contextual barriers to inclusion along a more, well-trodden route. Examination of the longer term outcomes for this group of young people, in the context of the aspirations in the early stages of parenthood, would be an interesting follow-up to the present study. This work could consider whether their initial aspirations as new parents were achieved, given the additional responsibilities of parenthood as well as the barriers of existing social and educational circumstances that these young people had experienced prior to becoming parents.

The young people in this study demonstrate their readiness for social engagement and their ambitions for themselves and their child. This response was common across gender, age group and ethnicity. There was some difference in how ambition was articulated in relation to gender. Young men talked about their role as a provider, in a very traditional sense – providing for their partner and their child, whilst young women talked about being a role model for their child and ensuring their child had improved life chances. Young women were more focused on their child's future, whilst young men's ambitions were articulated more in relation to providing financially for their family.

However, the lack of existing attention to the importance of supportive relationships within the educational and social environment was striking throughout the study. These young people, who were striving to develop a positive social outlook following the birth of their child, had not been inspired by their own educational and social backgrounds and experience. Directly addressing the challenge of engaging all young people and providing pathways for them to meet their goals and develop an aspirational outlook, may in fact be more effective means of delaying parenthood than simple prevention strategies (Harden et al., 2009). Interventions targeting the social determinants of early parenthood such as youth development programmes that aim to promote self-esteem, positive aspirations, and a sense of purpose through

vocational, educational, volunteering, and life skills work could be more appropriate strategies for reducing unintended teenage pregnancy rates. The limited existing evidence base (Harden et al., 2009) illustrates that programmes of social support, educational support, and skills training delivered to young people have a more immediate impact, (also see Jessiman 2012). By broadening young people's expectations and aspirations for the future, and offering young people work experience in their local communities, careers advice, group work to stimulate active reflection, and discussion of future careers and employment opportunities, youth development programmes could go some way to mitigating young people's dislike of school. This study adds to the evidence and suggest that the wider benefits of encouraging young people to be socially engaged and personally ambitious should not be underestimated. This will be the case for those who become parents just as much as for those who do not. The young people in this study clearly demonstrate their readiness for social engagement and the development of their ambitions for themselves and their child. To value them and be attentive to their needs is a clear imperative. The lack of attention to the importance of supportive relationships within the educational and social environment was striking throughout the study.

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